

HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2007

The Historical Commission is one of the standing committees of the Town of Amherst, created by Town Meeting in October 1972. Under M.G.L., Ch.40, sec.8D, a historical commission is responsible “for the preservation, protection, and development of the historical or archeological assets of the town or city.”

MEMBERSHIP: Seven Commission members are appointed by the Select Board for three-year terms, renewable once. Comprising the FY 07 Commission were:

Gai Carpenter, Clerk
Lyle Denit
Lynda Faye (appointed in November)
Michael Hanke (appointed in September)
Edith Nye MacMullen, Chair
Elizabeth Sharpe (appointed in January)
James Wald, Vice-Chair

For the first two months of the year, the Commission operated without a full body; by January, with the last new appointment, it was rejuvenated. The three new members brought exemplary backgrounds, commitment, common sense, and good humor to the Commission’s deliberations. The Town of Amherst is fortunate to have such dedicated citizens anxious to serve.

SUBCOMMITTEES:

In order to facilitate the work, and spread the burden around, the members of the Commission chaired subcommittees; in fact, each subcommittee chair took over the primary responsibility for the particular topic and reported to the Commission at each monthly meeting.

Cemetery Improvements: Lynda Faye (formerly the West Cemetery Committee)
Community Preservation: Edith Nye MacMullen
Comprehensive Planning: James Wald; Ms MacMullen served on one Work Group
250th Anniversary: Lyle Denit and Lynda Faye

Jonathan Tucker continued to serve as staff liaison, providing, through his historical knowledge and commitment, invaluable guidance.

MAJOR ACTIVITIES:

The work of the Commission can be divided into two broad categories: the routine, on-going responsibilities, and initiatives; both have grown.

Demolition Delay Hearings: Eight applications were brought before the Commission. In four cases no hearing was required; in one, the Commission was satisfied that the intent of the owner to sell the barn for removal met preservation requirements; public hearings were held in three cases, after which demolition was approved, although in each case the Commission required that the structure be documented.

Credit must be given to Mr. Denit, who became the Commission’s unofficial barn man, willing to crawl around in dusty lofts to examine the state of barns for which a permit was requested; Mr. Hanke often alerted the group to possible threats to buildings in the center of the Town. The

Commission, in its deliberations, expressed real concern, however, that the community had, over time, concentrated on the preservation of residential structures at the expense of secondary ones such as sheds and barns; much of 19th century Amherst is disappearing, sometimes destroyed without the Commission's review.

The Commission also determined that at some future meeting the procedures for Demolition Delay needed to be reviewed and formalized.

Advisory: Perhaps as an indication of the Commission's increased visibility, it received a number of requests for approval or informatory communications; examples include a description of a projected wireless tower, a presentation of the projected plans for the expansion of the Lord Jeffrey Inn, and a detailed presentation of the redesign of the Route 116-Bay Road intersection. The chair wrote a letter in support of the College's application for historical status for the Inn. At the direction of the Commission, she also wrote letters supporting grant applications from the Emily Dickinson Museum, the Unitarian-Universalist Church, and the Amherst Woman's Club. The Commission also endorsed the Town Manager's proposal to reinstall the warehoused Civil War plaques.

The Commission feels strongly that it is vital to support the preservation efforts of other members of the community. However, when support is lent to private groups, such as the Strong House Museum or the Emily Dickinson Museum, the Town should get, in return, a historic restriction on the structure; such now exist for both museums.

An example of cooperation was the joint efforts of the Public Works Committee and the Commission concerning the South Common. The two groups met on several occasions and hosted a public meeting at the Munson Library to present the historical background researched by Ms. Bonnie Parsons, the consultant hired by the Commission as part of its CPA-funded survey of the Common. Much more needs to be done in this area, as there are competing views on a great variety of issues, such as: is the Common an historic open space and how has this evolved; is its function primarily a hindrance to traffic; what are the traffic needs now and how can these be balanced with the community's needs and opinions? In addition, the Commission met on several occasions concerning CPA proposals and the Kimball House project.

For some time, perceived threats to historical buildings on the University of Massachusetts campus have been brought to the Commission's attention. As a result, Mr. Denit and Ms. MacMullen met with Mr. Cahill, Director of Facilities and Campus Planning, to initiate a discussion. Mr. Joseph Larson, an emeritus professor and the spearhead of the efforts to save the threatened buildings, met with the Commission and consulted frequently with the chair; she also wrote in support of the group's application for historical recognition of the structures. The Commission will continue to collaborate with Mr. Larson's group.

National Historic Register Nominations: Progress has been slow in this category due to the press of other business. One application was approved for forwarding to Amherst College to be included in their application, and the Commission visited another house for possible nomination.

Implementation of the Preservation Plan:

The Commission continues to be guided by the Five-year Preservation Plan adopted in 2005, although it is clear that, while the goals remain valid, the specific objectives were overly ambitious, and we have fallen significantly behind schedule.

Work on the West Cemetery continued. Vandalism on several occasions necessitated repairs to the mural, and metal boxes had to be installed to protect the descriptive brochures. But the planned installation of lights and of the permanent signs has been delayed due to pressures of work on the Town departments involved, as has the redesign of the Pleasant Street entrance. Mr. Hanke has volunteered to design and oversee the installation of permanent signs; however, such signs are costly, and their installation may be delayed. An RFP for the restoration of the oldest stones was published and work will commence next year. A private individual proposed to fund the restoration of a family marker, but the proposed design was not acceptable to the Commission. It became apparent that guidelines for such individual efforts are necessary, a task the Commission will undertake next year.

Kimball House (575 North East Street): Negotiations with the owners, Conservation Commission, and the Town were complicated; the Commission was not actively involved, but its interests certainly were. Although the Demolition Delay expired, the owners continued to cooperate with the Town and clearly agreed not to destroy the house; final resolution is near, and the matter will be brought to the fall Town Meeting.

Other Cemeteries: A new fence around the historic North Cemetery was built by students and instructors at the Smith Vocational High School; the Town's thanks go to them. A proposal to install a fence around the South Cemetery was defeated by the Town Meeting. The Commission realizes that it did not properly involve the residents in our well-meant proposal. Restoration of the headstones in both cemeteries remains a long-term goal.

South Common: An historical survey was completed and the results discussed at a public hearing. This is an on-going project, dependent, as noted above, on related Town projects.

East Common: A consultant is engaged in a study of the East Common, assisted by Ms. Sharpe. Once again, action in this area will require collaboration with other Town bodies, especially DPW.

Preservation of Historic Documents. Due to the pressures on the new Town Clerk and the work load of the Curator at Special Collections at the Jones Library, work in this area proceeds slowly. The Commission received a report on the progress to date, and Ms. Carpenter monitors the progress. It should be emphasized that the efforts of the Commission are, for the most part, funded by CPA money. A full report on the expenditures may be found in the Community Preservation Act Committee report. The Historical Commission is grateful for the sympathetic hearing we always receive from the Committee.

Lecture Series. For the third year the Commission sponsored a lecture series, focusing on aspects of Amherst's history. In the fall, James Smith spoke on 18th and 19th century farming, and Peter Westover described and showed his pictures of contemporary farms. In January, at the Strong

House Museum, Patricia Lutz read a paper on the bicycle craze of the 19th century; Elizabeth Sharpe, at the Jones Library, discussed the Williamsburg flood, the focus of her recent book; in April, at Applewood, Ruth Jones introduced William Clark Smith and his role both in the Town of Amherst and as president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College; for the final lecture, also at the Strong House and in conjunction with that museum's new exhibition, Cynthia Dickinson spoke on Emily Dickinson. The series is another example of the Commission's reaching out to and cooperating with other Town agencies and groups, all of whom share an interest in the Town's history.

In conclusion, it has been a privilege and a challenge to serve on the Historical Commission for the past six years. I leave the group with gratitude for their companionship, commitment, and cooperation and am confident that the Town's interests are in very good hands.

Respectfully submitted,

Edith Nye MacMullen